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## **Tutors' perceptions of the role of written feedback in promoting self-regulated learning in students: A case study of Durham**

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## **Tutors' perceptions of the role of written feedback in promoting self-regulated learning in students: A case study of Durham**

Students' self-regulated learning is very important in the higher education as students are expected to construct their own knowledge. However, tutors are also supposed to help their students to overcome their difficulties when students study independently. One of the ways to help students is to provide written feedback, which is a crucial part of formative assessment, because in that case, tutors may indicate their students' weaknesses and give advice to them about how to strengthen those weak learning points. Therefore, it can be said that written feedback is a useful tool to enable students to improve their learning. In the literature, while there is a lot of research regarding the effect of written feedback on student self-regulated learning by measuring students' abilities, there are few studies about how tutors try to promote their students' self-regulated learning. Therefore, this study aims to investigate how tutors use written feedback in order to contribute to their students' self-regulated learning ability. In this study, 37 academics were interviewed from different departments at University of Durham. Phenomenography has been used as a research method to analyse the data.

**Keywords:** Self-regulated learning, Formative assessment, Written feedback, Phenomenography

## **1. Introduction**

The number of people entering universities has been enormously increasing at the present time (Boud and Molloy, 2013). However, the amount of resources such as the number of academics and funding has not kept pace with this rise (Boud and Molloy, 2013). Thus, there is increased pressure on academic staff because they are responsible to improve their students' understanding. Some authors assume that student-centred learning might decrease this pressure on academics because in this learning method, teachers give responsibility to their students to help them to construct their own learning (Labuhn et al., 2010). Student-centred learning, described as students' becoming responsible for and actively involved in their own learning, is recognized to be more beneficial for the promotion of student learning and understanding than teacher-centred learning, defined as teachers' being responsible for their students' learning (Barzegar, 2012). Furthermore, Pintrich (2004) describes students as citizens of learning in student-centred learning environments and as tourists of learning in teacher-centred learning environments. So, some researchers argue that since students are able to construct knowledge for themselves in student-centred learning environments, each student's learning output and experience are unique (Duffy and Azevedo, 2015; DiBenedetto and Benbenutty, 2013). For this reason, student-centred learning pedagogy is more likely to lead students to improve their self-regulated learning abilities. Students who are able to use self-regulated learning strategies can reach desired learning goals and get deeply engaged in learning.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1. Self-Regulated Learning**

In literature, self-regulated learning is described as students' taking responsibility to plan, monitor and control their own cognition, motivation and behaviour to reach their goals (Pintrich, 2004). To improve this skill, students should create goals, choose strategies to achieve these goals and observe their own developments towards the goals they set (Schunk, 1996). It is considered to be an important skill for learners as Zimmerman (2000) notes learners having self-regulated learning ability are more likely to learn more and have higher levels of academic satisfaction than those who do not have self-regulated learning ability.

Models of SRL consist of three different phases summarised below that are 'forethought and planning', 'performance monitoring' and 'reflection on performance' (Zimmerman, 2002). In the 'forethought and planning' phase, students analyse the learning objectives of a particular task and create a plan to reach the goals. In the 'performance monitoring' phase, students implement strategies to improve their learning and monitor the effectiveness of strategies they used whether their learning develops as well as they have adequate motivation to complete the task. In the last 'reflection on performance' phase, students assess their performance and outcomes to assess whether the strategies they selected worked or not. Students also manage their emotions about the outcomes of their learning effort. Self-evaluation and –reflection will affect their future planning, strategies and goals by applying these three phases in order. In other words, this diagram works as a loop (Zimmerman, 2002). If learners see something is not going well, they can go back and reorganize their phases from

the beginning or they can go back to the phase which they have problem to fix it to continue their ways towards the goals they set.

Research shows that self-regulated learners spend more time to learn topics, willingly answer the questions, seek out help from their peers, teachers or additional sources to achieve the learning goals (Labuhn et al., 2010; Elstad and Turmo, 2010). Additionally, self-regulated learners create the most suitable learning environment for themselves to develop a deep understanding of the subject matter (Kolovelonis et al., 2011). Therefore, briefly it can be said that students who are able to use the diagram drawn below are more likely to accomplish the goal they set.

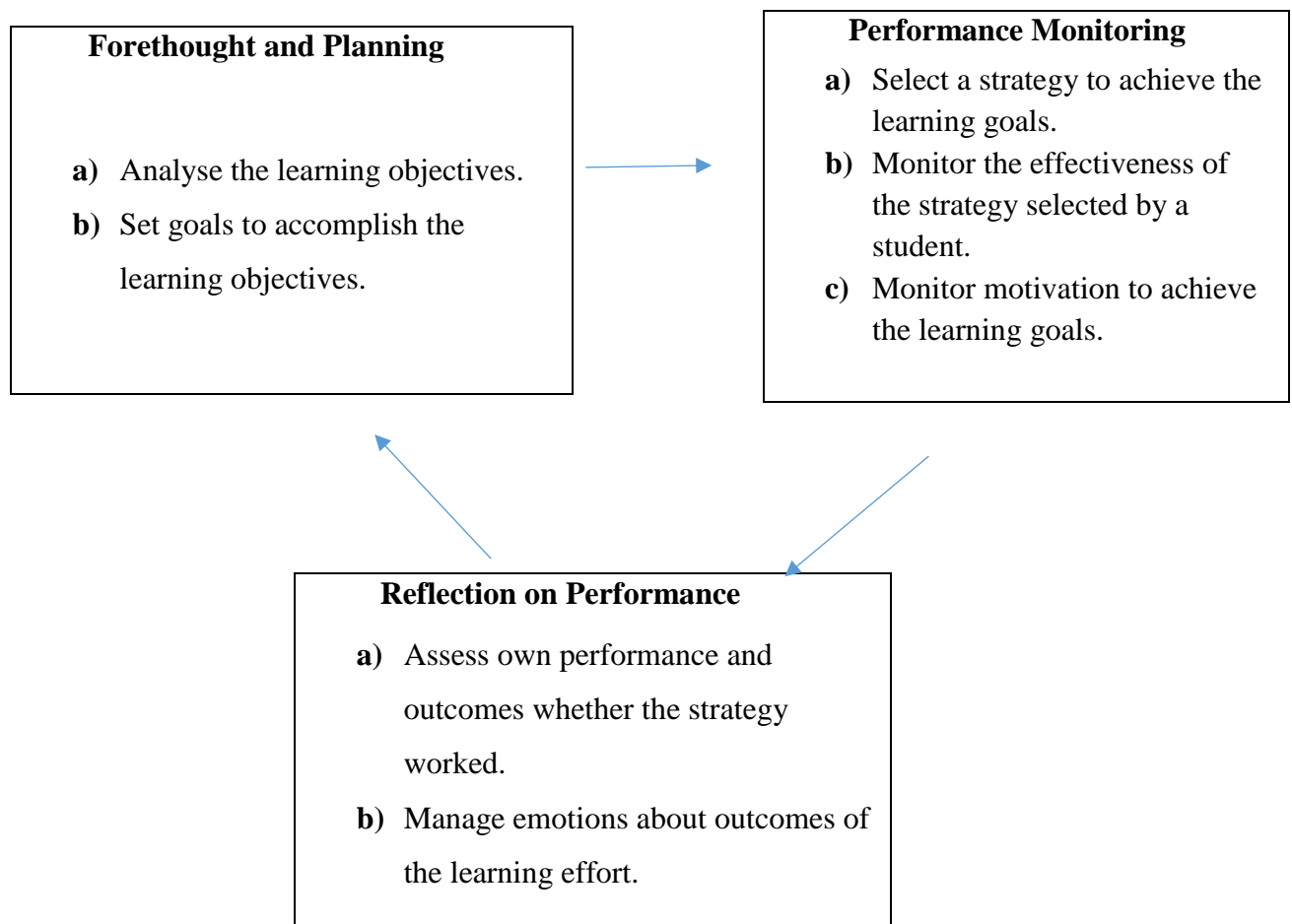


Figure 1. The phases of self-regulated learning based on Zimmerman (2002)

## 2.2. Formative Assessment

There are two well-known assessment models that are 'summative' and 'formative' (Black and Wiliam, 1998). Summative assessment is generally used to measure student performance in any subjects across the globe (Taras, 2005). Formative assessment is described as checking whether teaching instructions worked or not and tracking student progress rather than judging their understanding through exams or tests (Sadler, 1989). Formative assessment does not aim to judge students whether they are academically sufficient, it aims to determine students'

weaknesses and strengths to show them a way how to improve their weak skills in a particular domain of a subject (Steiner, 2016). Some researchers argue that applying merely summative assessment is not a good way to measure and improve student knowledge because it may lead students not to critically learn a task or a subject (Hattie and Timperley, 2007). Moreover, students may tend to memorize knowledge to receive high grade rather than further engage in a task (Sadler, 1989).

On the other hand, some academics argue that formative assessment enables students to become self-regulated learners because this assessment may stimulate student motivation that is described as the key factor of learning in higher education (Zimmerman, 2008; Pintrich, 2004). To determine whether formative assessment enhances student learning in the classroom, Black and Wiliam (1998) reviewed 250 journal articles and book chapters and then they conducted their own research. In their research, they measured students' test performances by comparing two groups that students who participated in formative activities and those who did not. According to the result, formative assessment is considerably helpful for student learning. Additionally, it increases all type of student group achievement, particularly low-achieving students too (Black and Wiliam, 1998a).

Formative assessment emphasizes the idea that feedback is a fundamental tool to contribute student learning because it provides information to students that they can use it to move forward (Brookhart, 2013). Furthermore, it raises students' awareness about their learning progress by indicating them the gap between their current academic skills and desired goals (Wiliam, 2011). Taras (2005) points out that to help students to close this gap on a task, detailed feedback that includes specific comments and advice how to correct their mistakes should be supplied to students as in this way students are more likely to pay attention to the task. Moreover, detailed feedback can be very effective if it manages to guide students to improve their weaknesses (Higgins, 2000; Shute, 2008). Hattie and Timperley (2007) report that detailed feedback can be given to students by using written feedback because teachers are able to express their opinion about their students' works in detail in that case.

### **2.3. Written Feedback**

Written feedback is a good way to inform students about their mistakes and poor abilities and to advise them how to advance their poor abilities (Chong, 2018). Therefore, it may be said that written feedback enables students to take their own responsibilities to advance their knowledge, because teachers offer them some ways how to reach the learning goals (Xu, 2017). When students receive written feedback from their teachers, they are more likely to perceive better about the success criteria since students perceiving what they are supposed to do to achieve the desired learning goal may make sufficient effort to reach the goals (Carless, 2006). This also enables students to activate them as the owners of their own learning (Hattie, 2006).

Since students take their own responsibility to fill a gap between what is understood and what is aimed to be understood, they are more likely to accomplish their goal because students create their own studying style and learn how to learn by themselves (Steiner, 2016).

Furthermore, students can have adequate motivation as they have already begun to be able to discover the most suitable method for themselves to successfully attain their learning goals (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, 2006).

Teachers' advice given in written feedback to students how to reach the learning goals may also lead them to create a bridge between teachers and students as students can read what their teachers think about their work and what their weak abilities are and the way they should follow to achieve the learning goals (Boud and Molloy, 2013). Moreover, students have an opportunity to read their feedback when they need to remember what they are supposed to do to improve their skills (Xu, 2017). However, researchers emphasize that students sometimes do not perceive what teachers mean in their written feedback (Chong, 2018). Furthermore, students may define their written feedback as useless to improve their learning, while teachers think their feedback is considerably helpful for their students (Basturkmen et al., 2014). For this reason, this study aims to investigate how academics describe their written feedback and how they use it to improve students' learning and their self-regulated learning ability.

### **3. Methodology**

This research focuses on the relation between written feedback and student self-regulated learning in higher education. Although most research has discussed the effect of written feedback on student academic progress in terms of students' perceptions and opinions, there is very little research about this topic investigating academics' perspectives of it. Therefore, I am planning to compare academics' perceptions and implementations about how they use their written feedback to help their students to become self-regulated learners. I also aim to investigate what kind of differences there are among various departments. So, in this research project, 37 academics (Assistant, Associate and Full Professor) have been interviewed in the Faculty of Arts and Humanities, the Faculty of Science and the Faculty of Social Sciences and Health at Durham University. Since I will analyse individuals' experiences about learning and teaching in the higher education, phenomenography seemed to be appropriate approach to answer my research questions:

- 1) How do academics conceptualise self-regulated learning?
- 2) What are academics' perceptions about how their written feedback enables their students to become self-regulated learners at Durham University?

#### **3.1. Phenomenography**

Phenomenography was formed and primarily developed as a new research approach by Swedish educational researchers during the 1970s. (Marton et al., 1977; Marton and Svensson, 1979; Säljö, 1979). Ference Marton firstly used phenomenography to investigate variation in student learning outcomes. The purpose of this research approach is to find out questions related to how people learn and understand knowledge in a specific context (Marton and Booth, 1997; Svensson, 1997). Using phenomenography research in different contexts to explore experience of learning leads it to include the most typical experiences

(Edwards, 2007). Moreover, the development of phenomenography has been still going on in the discipline of education (Marton and Booth, 1997; Svensson, 1997).

Phenomenography is most frequently defined as “a research method for mapping the qualitatively different ways in which people experience, conceptualise, perceive, and understand various aspects of, and various phenomena in, the world around them” (Marton, 1986, p. 31). Phenomenography is describing things of appearance and things which people have experienced because people collectively experience and understand phenomena in qualitatively different ways which are interrelated (Marton, 1986). In the phenomenography, the object and the research subjects are viewed together so it can be said that phenomenography is a relational approach to explore their relations (Limberg, 2000). So, when phenomenography creates inseparable relations between subject and object, the phenomenon as a whole is represented in that case. Individuals’ experiences are very important for my research as I will try to analyse academics’ perceptions and experiences about learning, teaching and assessment. I will also aim to discuss self-regulated learning construct under those educational tenets.

#### **4. Discussion and Conclusion**

Students should be able to use cognitive strategies to get engaged in their learning tasks (Xu, 2017). After using cognitive strategies, they need to use metacognitive strategies to monitor their own progress whether cognitive strategies they used worked or not (Zimmerman, 2008). Students’ evaluations of their own learning progress are very important to organise their resources to benefit from them effectively and efficiently. In that case, students are able to regulate their own learning to attain the goals they set. To be able to use cognitive and metacognitive strategies to organise their own learning progress, students should have sufficient motivation because motivation energizes them to make effort to achieve their own learning goals (William, 2011).

If students describe that their learning tasks are important and students have real interest in them, they are more likely to be willing to complete their tasks. Students who are willing to improve their learning can set more challenging goals for themselves. If they achieve the goals they set, they will likely to improve their confidence too. Students’ having sufficient confidence might set mastery goals as a next step (DiBenedetto and Bembenuatty, 2013). In that way, students might get deeper understanding of a subject matter with time. As a result, students can gain self-regulated learning abilities so they can transfer those abilities to understand other subject matters (DiBenedetto and Bembenuatty, 2013). Therefore, students are also able to create their own learning environment to meet their own needs to attain the goals they set.

Written feedback supports students to advance their weak skills and understanding by showing them what they need to do to improve those weaknesses (Chong, 2018). Students receiving written feedback from their teachers can set more challenging goals to push themselves to develop their learning abilities more. Therefore, it can be said that written feedback is one of student learning environment components that enables students to study independently to reach highest academic capabilities (Xu, 2017).



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